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Contextual Evidence: A Collection of Vignettes

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Professor Kelly

RSCC 104 GH

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Contextual Evidence: A Collection of Vignettes

Venn Diagram

The perfect curve of a circle, gently overlapping the curve of another. Two primary shapes, intersecting to form an almond of sorts. Segregating. Separating the things that are just so dissimilar that they cannot share space. Good and bad, black and white, rich and poor: the dichotomies that fuel the human condition. These things seem absolute. It is one or the other. Yet sometimes, you get the almond. The commonalities. The proportionately smaller region of the diagram. Those rare spaces that illustrate two diverging concepts on common ground. Those grey, ambiguous areas that eclipse the two circles entirely.

Hammer

A hammer. Hanging from the loop of my Dad's Wrangler jeans. It is heavy. With a blue rubberized grip. A thick circular metal front. Two metal prongs on the back. A simple design that can create or dismantle the most complex of constructions. Strong, powerful, and versatile. Just like my Dad. I sit on top of a tub of grout at six years old in a stranger's den or basement or kitchen. I watch him as he hammers, drills, and saws various cuts of wood to create a masterpiece. He appeases my request to let me use the hammer. Struggling to lift the tool, I miss. He takes over and continues his work. Sanding down the wood as a layer of saw dust sits on the floor. Measuring and marking with his favorite red, flat pencil. A construction site is no place for

a small girl with a ponytail, baseball cap, and miniature work boots. Yet I demand to spend my days as a child with my hero. And of course he let me. The very definition of “Daddy’s Little Girl.” When we weren’t at Home Depot we were cooking. Grocery shopping. Listening to music. Going to Starbucks for cappuccinos and rice crispy treats. A rugged, strong, tough guy and a sweet, chatty little girl. A man who would stop in the pouring rain to save worms on the sidewalk and gently air lift them back to the grass to appease me. A man who would go to great lengths to make his only daughter happy. A man who would go to great lengths to help anyone in need. The only Dad at girl scouts. The only Dad at school pick up. The only Dad who could fix anything. Toys, appliances, my problems. Anything. All he needed was his tool box.

Trench Coat

Sitting in the living room as my pupils take in the colorful glaze of cartoons. It is dark out. I hear the jingling of keys on the front porch, it must be six thirty. The sound of one key entering into the lock and turning. As the door is pushed open, a cold gust of wind is swept inside. Click. Clack. High heels slamming down on the hard wood floor. My Mom rushes into the living room, her nose flushed red. She comes in and gives me a hug and a kiss, her cold cheek brushing against my warm face. Coming home from work, wearing her black trench coat. The material is thick and shiny. Big black buttons and a sash. Long and spacious over her petite frame. Protecting her from the elements during her journey from the train station to her office building, twice a day. She asks how my day was. I tell her of all the exciting things Daddy and I did. She says she worked all day. Crunching numbers, cutting checks. She looks tired. Oddly enough it is my most vivid memory of my mother from childhood. Day after day, her coming home from work in order to give me the life she never had. She never complained. Instead, she

kept my Dad and I in check. Keeping our grandiose ideas and spending in perspective. A selfless individual whom I spent the majority of my teenage years arguing with. I never understood her. Always playing the part of a martyr. As I got older, I finally realized her plight. A go-getter, who had been sacrificing for others her entire life. And the sacrificing never ended. Private school, new toys, and new clothes. Always assisting me with anything I needed help with. One of the hardest workers I have ever known. Still coming home from a long day's work in the same black trench coat.

Three

One. Two. Three. Not four, not five, not six. Three. Three plates on the table for dinner. Three stockings hanging over the fire place. Relatively small in comparison to other families. I always wanted a brother or sister. Someone to play with. Instead, I was surrounded by adults. Garnering all of the attention. Everyone at my beck and call. I became precocious, mature, jaded. All at a very young age. I even dropped out of preschool. Refusing to go back because I did not enjoy nap time. And my parents let me. They supported me. They let me do my own thing. I guess they were very progressive. My Mom worked full time. My Dad worked, but mainly took care of me. A different family dynamic than that of my friends. Modern, close, weird. All adjectives that I am sure were used to describe us.

Grass

The picture perfect house. A beautiful colonial with blue shutters. A white picket fence and a swing set in the backyard. And of course there is grass. Vibrant, crisp green grass covering every square inch of land that looks as if it has been cut with a laser. Bright flowers line the

walkway, begging you to enter through the doorway. And then it is time to go home. Away from the quaint colonials. Down the bumpy, pothole filled streets. The houses are colorful, not white. Partly because of the paint choices, partly because of the colorful graffiti. There are no shutters, mailboxes, or swing sets. There are no trees. There is certainly no grass. There is grey, textured cement. Some parts are smooth, some are cracked, and some have handprints or names etched in. And then approaches 628 William Street. The corner house. Up the steep cement steps and into the right door, not the left. The left door houses Mima and Papa. Through the hallway, into the dining room, into the kitchen, out the back door. To the backyard. There is grass. It's a dull green, but unmistakably green. With some small patches of dirt. The grass isn't even. There is a tree buzzing with bumble bees. There is a yellow swing set, complete with monkey bars, two yellow swings, and a slide. The swing rocks back and forth in the breeze, making a slight creaking sound. To the right, the street. Filled with empty bottles, napkins, bags and litter of the sort. To the left, an empty dirt filled backyard. No swing set, no trees, no grass.

Fences

Fences are supposed to keep things in and keep things out. The fence keeps the small but spirited Yorkshire Terrier from running out into the street. It keeps the big, but misunderstood pit bull from coming in. Some fences are made of wood panels, some are made of well-placed stones. Ours was made of aluminum chain links. I reach out and put my hand through one of the diamond shaped links. It's cold to the touch. As my finger gently outlines the grey colored metal, I wonder how many links there are in the entire fence. Through the hole I see a face coming towards me. She is about my age, but darker than I. She asks if she can come in the yard to play. Her name is Chrissy. We play in the backyard. On the swing set. Rolling in the grass. We are

best friends. As seasons change, we still play. We play with my clothes, my dolls, my toys—in my house, enclosed in my aluminum chain fence.

Dolls

I loved my toys. I was attached to each one. My Barbie's, my American Girl dolls, my play kitchen. The colorful plastic. The doll's perfect teeth, perfect smile, beautiful clothes. I would spend hours dressing all of them up. Brushing their hair. Giving them names. Chrissy loved them too. She asked to borrow them. She promised she would take good care of them and bring them back to me soon. She said I didn't need all of my toys. She said I had too many. Each time I would say yes. But I never saw my toys again. Eventually I missed all of my toys too much and went to her house to get them. Up the steep concrete steps, into the hallway, into a room of nothing. Cold, dark, and empty. Chrissy and her family sitting on one small, torn couch. No dolls, no toys. Chrissy says her Dad took her toys. I leave Chrissy's house. Go back through the hallway, down the concrete steps. Out onto the cracked, concrete sidewalk. Up my steep concrete steps into my warm, bright, and full house. I hold my dolls extra tight.

Uniforms

It's time to wake up and get ready for school. I walk to my closet, open the door. I see a khaki skirt and green polo. I see a green and blue plaid jumper. A maroon kilt. Uniforms symbolizing my thirteen years spent in private, parochial education. I didn't like the skirt; it was a green toned khaki that was unflattering. The green and blue jumper was my favorite. It was easy. It reminded me of Christmas. The kilt was comfy. Uniforms are a polarizing subject. Some love them, some hate them. Arguments against them are not very strong. Uniforms are easy.

They look neat. They give all students an even playing field. No one has to worry about having the latest clothes. Everyone looks the same. I go to school. I ask my school friend to come over my house to play. She says her mom won't let her because I live in a bad neighborhood. I don't understand, yet I feel sad. I am one of them. I have on the same skirt, the same polo, the same jumper. Yet I am different. And they know it. They are not mean about it. I am not bullied, I am just different. They do not exclude me. My friend invites me over to her house to play instead. Her mom picks us up from school in her fancy car. We drive to her house. There are countless trees, beautiful grass. Her house is huge. There is a stone fence. We walk up the flower lined path, through the front door, into the foyer. It is cold, dark, and empty.

Pencil

Pointy. Dull. Repeat. The vicious cycle in the lifespan of a pencil. It is a shade of yellow-orange. Bright, yet muted at the same time. A thin, metallic band topped with a little pink nub. Straight edges on each side, yet still capable of rolling off the desk. Tap. Tap. Tap. Against my arm. Each time the point ever so softly pricking my skin. I hear my name being called out by my teacher. Reprimanding me for fidgeting with my pencil. I stop, blush. Decide not to talk for the rest of the day. Going over and over the reprimand I had received. Others would be yelled at and then proceed on with their day. However, I could not recover. Fidgeting, worrying, overthinking. The way I spent the majority of my middle school years. Even the smell of school was overwhelming. Producing feelings of sadness. The ache of uneasiness felt in my stomach. Morning Prayer, followed by the Pledge of Allegiance. Religion, math, vocabulary, science. Subjects came easy to me. Yet I never wanted to be there. The constant anxiety. Anxiety over everything. The small stuff. Talking in class, saying the wrong answer, tripping in front of my

peers. The big stuff. Worrying about my parents, my family. The crippling angst that never left. School was supposed to be fun. At the very least, it wasn't supposed to be this stressful. Yet there I was fidgeting, worrying, overthinking. Anxiety continued to follow me. Over the big stuff and the small stuff. Yet nothing will stress me out quite like middle school. For even the sight of a rolling pencil makes me cringe.

Dominoes

The smooth rectangular block. The color of bone. With rounded edges creating the perfect domino piece. Perfect black, concentric dots indicating the value of each little briquette. Mima, my grandma, always taught me to use the doubles first so that I am left with a smaller number. In the kitchen on my grandparent's glass table. My Papa would flip all of the dominoes over and shuffle them. The loud, crashing sound of my grandpa's large, tired and calloused hands swirling the pieces around the table. We each take eight pieces. One by one we place a domino down in hopes that we become victorious. Mima sips her café that is as black as the night sky. From a miniscule espresso cup with delicate pink flowers. The smell is strong, but familiar. Si. Gracias. Por que. Spanish, the only language spoken in their side of the house. Mima and Papa talk about their jobs in the factories. Hard, strenuous, tiring jobs that they do not like. They tell me to study, to work hard, to go to college so that I will never have to do the jobs they do. I would be the first in the family to graduate from college. They tell me of their hardships. How they came to this country from Cuba. With the clothes on their back, five dollars, and three children. They are kind, they are loving, they are generous. Only a few domino pieces left. It looks like I am winning. Mima tells me more about her job at the factory. How her company makes plastic bottles. How tired she is. Papa starts talking about his family in Cuba. How they

cannot leave. How he cannot do anything about it. I finally lay my last domino down, it is the double blank. I win. Mima always told me to keep the blank for last. And I listened.

Smile

The anatomy of a smile. Fake, sincere, forced. Big, small. Revealing teeth, not revealing any. Braces, dimples. All characteristics of the many different types of smiles. I sit at a tan plastic table in a high school cafeteria. All of the chairs are yellow. Instantly regretting my decision to come to a high school in which I do not know anyone. Deciding to take a different path than my peers who I had known since Kindergarten. Other tables have groups of girls sitting and chatting away. They probably all know each other. I see someone walking in. They do not appear to know anyone either. I decide to smile. Not too much as to come across as creepy. But with a definite smile, to appear warm and open. She sits down. I decide to introduce myself to get the conversation going. She introduces herself as well, she seems nice. More girls join in and we end up just like all of the other tables. Talking and chatting. I was on edge the first few months of high school. Forcing myself to be more outgoing. To talk, to make friends, to smile. I was skeptical of the friendly outlook for some time. Previously surrounded by individuals who were catty, selfish, and jealous. That day sitting in the cafeteria, I decided to change my fate. To be able to start fresh. To go out of my way to be the person I had always wanted to be. Genuinely friendly, kind, and happy. To be able to recognize sadness or anxiety in others and help them in need. To be positive. To be a good friend. All it took was a hello. A kind word. A smile.

Identity Diffused

Identity Diffused. A psychological cognitive state of identity in which one has not searched for an identity and has not yet made a commitment to a certain identity or role. Characterized by a continual crisis. Looking back, I was in complete diffusion. It is a common part of adolescence. Yet, while most of my friends were excited about going on college tours and picking the perfect university, I could not be bothered. My Mom managed to drag me to two college tours. I chose one of the two. Done. But it wasn't done. I knew that college was what was expected. It had to be done. It's not that I didn't want to go to college. I didn't have dreams of becoming a hair dresser or a chef. I knew that I eventually wanted a career that needed a degree. I just felt uneasy. I wasn't happy about leaving my family like most of my friends. I wasn't excited to grow up. Left to internalize these sacrilegious feelings, I was completely miserable. And diffused. Going through the motions and hoping things would fall into place.

Columns

Dried violet petals. Each one a dusty lilac color with edges turned up and cracked ever so slightly. Thousands of petals, floating on a large tan column, encased in a layer of clear plastic. A dozen massive columns with the same flowery motif holding up the Intensive Care Unit in the hospital. Different from the chaos, the blood, the crying of the Emergency Department. The ICU has horrifying silence. It is clean. Quiet, except for the murmur of heart monitors and ventilators. A small waiting room off to the side with plush couches and a large oak conference table. Each nurse has one little desk separating the rooms of her two patients. The rooms are large, encased with clear glass. Filled with unidentifiable equipment. In each bed is an unidentifiable person, their identities covered by the fog of their sickness. And this is the place where my life stopped.

My Dad, my rock, was sick. Very sick. Coming out of surgery everything started to fail. His heart, his kidneys, his lungs, all failing. Lying in bed, incoherent, his face covered with tubes. The doctors said they could do no more. They told us to say goodbye. As my fingers fiercely ran over each purple bead in my rosary, I pictured the column crumbling. The main pillar, the cornerstone of my family. Disintegrating right before my eyes. The priest came in. Last rites were said. And just when everything was about to fall apart- everything stayed perfectly intact.

Intravenous

Drip. Drop. Drip. A little pouch of liquid dangles from the rung of a metal IV pole like a Christmas ornament hanging off a tree branch. The liquid looks thick. It drops slowly. Drop by drop into a small little tube that pushes it further through spaghetti thin plastic. Winding down and around. Until it hits the vein and reaches freedom in the blood stream. Drip. Drop. Drip. Droplets of liquid turned into bags of liquid. Hours turned into days. Days passed, but my Dad did not. Everything got better. IV's and tubes slowly came off. But my own sanity did not. How. Why. A fluke? An absolute miracle? No one knows. The doctors who said they could do no more were now taking credit for saving my Dad's life. The torment of a miracle ate at my soul. I had come face to face with all of my anxieties. Life was no longer the same. How can one go on with their daily routine after something so scary, so special, so mysterious. Why were we spared the agony of losing a loved one, while so many other families are not. And so I continued with bitter realism. Maintaining the idea that there would be no more miracles for this family. We couldn't expect anything more. Drip. Drop. Drip. The rain comes down in gobs. Odd for August weather. Beading up over the hospital window. Blurring my vision. Intercepting the look of disappointment from my mom as I told her I was dropping out of school. Trying to savor the

time I had left with my Dad, I made a decision. My once cognitively diffused state became more diffused. As the rain came down and sent the diffusion through my veins.

Bread

The serrated knife gently saws at the crusty outer shell of a hard roll. Leaving little sawdust filaments on the cutting board as it pushes through to the soft, chewy center. As the knife moves swiftly across the roll, revealing little air pockets in the spongy center. Carefully cutting just enough to create the perfect bed for a sandwich. Tiny, black poppy seeds roll off of the top, creating a little sea of darkness on the red and black checkered floor. The process continues for two hundred more miniature loaves, each placed in three wicker baskets. And then the deli opens its doors for the morning rush. Greeting customers. Taking orders. Using the register. Cleaning and closing. Repeat. Day in and day out. The monotony of it all was the perfect medicine. Giving me just enough hardship to become completely fed up with the circumstances. Working and going home to take care of my Dad. He needed me and I was happy to be there for him. As long as I was there, nothing could go wrong. Until it went wrong again. And again. And again. Becoming friends with various nurses and doctors. Slowly becoming aware that life was going to happen with or without me there to direct it. And then my worries faded. After the anxiety and stress that occupied my being for so long, I realized that I was not meant to know how or why things happen. They just do. As the time came to enroll for school, I craved an enriching environment. As the first day of classes came I wore my shame like a scarlet letter, feeling silly for taking a semester off to “find myself”. To end up slicing bread all day. Walking down the long, crowded corridor. Sitting in a classroom. Realizing that slicing bread is what saved me. Realizing that life can take an apparent stand still and then return to normalcy at

some point. Without an explanation or a reason. And here I am, back in a classroom. Taking notes, listening, absorbing. Slicing bread only on the weekends.

Almonds

Reaching into the nut bowl, I grab a large diamond shape piece. It has minuscule holes perforating the shell, allowing the goodness inside to breathe. As the metal nut cracker comes down on the hunk and snaps it open, a small, hard object is expelled. About the size of a fingertip. Wrinkled, ridged, and brown. Picking at the object, what looks like layers of brown tissue paper peel off to reveal the creamy, beige meat. Layers of seemingly superfluous matter. All nurturing and protecting the nut inside. Irrelevant pieces of information, memories, stories. All coming together in an attempt to offer some sort of explanation for my here. The unconventional aspects of my childhood. My family members. Their stories. My privileged upbringing, surrounded by poverty and wealth. My experiences of misfortune and pure luck. All coming together to make me who I am. A blend of what life has to offer. Fortunate enough to have experienced all of these contrasts. To have gained such valuable life experience. To be able to bring all of these experiences together and use them to the best of my ability. These contrasts and similarities all working together to form a context. A context that cannot be explained in a simple, concrete way. A context that must be thought of as the almond. Centered between two perfectly concentric, overlapping circles.